

Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters

by Merri Rosenberg

"It's just a little hard for me to think of this little China doll taking my mother's name. Your grandmother—this would be hard to explain to her."

from Daniel Goldfarb's 2004 play "Sarah, Sarah"

But it's *not* so hard to explain anymore. It's much like real life. During the past decade, plenty of Jewish grandparents have become familiar with the situation explored in this play, in part about the decision of an older, single Jewish woman to adopt a Chinese baby girl.

Today, "you're shocked when you see an Asian child with an Asian parent," observes Miriam Hipsh about her former neighborhood on New York's Upper West Side. Hipsh is a 59-year-old writer and the founder of a dating web site for the 50-plus set; she adopted her daughter, WuQing, 11 years ago.

Hipsh's experience—and Goldfarb's play—reflect the convergence of two trends: older Jewish women, some of whom have spent decades building up careers, who recognize that they want to experience motherhood, and China's "one child only" social policy, which resulted in the large-scale abandonment of baby girls in orphanages. The resulting phenomenon—of single Jewish women adopting Chinese daughters—has begun to transform the Jewish community. In pre-schools, day schools and after-school religious programs around the country, Asian girls are absorbing Jewish traditions through songs, history lessons and prayers, and learning the davening skills that will enable them to take their place on the bima. And at the same time, their conscientious Jewish mothers, eager to have their daughters embrace both their Jewish and Asian heritage, have enrolled them in Chinese

language classes, or Chinese dance, art and music programs, to develop their girls' diverse identities.

Consider WuQing Hipsh, now 12, who is a product of Manhattan's Stephen Wise synagogue nursery school and pre-K program, as well as a veteran of the Hebrew school at B'nai Jeshurun. (Like most of the Chinese daughters adopted by Jews, WuQing was formally converted to Judaism as a baby.) Since 2003, Hipsh and WuQing have lived in East Hampton, New York, where WuQing (whose Hebrew name, Devorah Sarah, is in memory of Hipsh's late mother, Dorothy), studies Chinese in her middle school and attends Hebrew school locally. She is preparing for her bat mitzvah next year.

"We're at Adas Yisroel, a very small congregation in Sag Harbor, that feels like a community," says Hipsh. "They welcome her. She's much loved by the synagogue. It feels wonderful."

However statistically small this phenomenon of Jewish single mothers with adopted Chinese daughters may be in the greater demographic picture, it has transformed the Jewish communal landscape in ways that weren't even imagined when these founding mothers first ventured to China little more than a decade ago.

Scott Rubin, co-author with Gary Tobin and Diane Tobin of *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*, says that "Chinese girls are being adopted by single women in the Jewish community partly because women with higher levels of education are having children later, and adoption is the avenue they pursue, and Chinese girls are available for adoption." When asked about whether Chinese girls are viewed as more compliant than boys, or than children of other backgrounds, Rubin notes, "There's an added advantage. We definitely heard the positive stereotype about Asian girls."

Rabbi Cantor (she holds both titles) Angela Warnick Buchdahl, of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, is the daughter of a Korean mother and an Ashkenazi Jewish father. She was raised in a Jewish household and believes that "It's different now than when I was a child growing up. It's not as unusual to see children of different races being Jewish."

Still, she notes, "young Asian children look around and don't see Jewish children who look like them. It's still hard. And on an intellectual level, there's the whole question of 'what does it mean to be a Jew?' You're part of a religion, but you're also part of a people, ethnicity or even race. Are we truly an open community, or are we not?"

These questions have begun to intrigue scholars, who are exploring such issues as Jewish identity outside the conventional, Ashkenazic, Euro-centric model.

Patricia Lin is project coordinator for the 2003-2007 study of "Asian American Jewish Experience and Identities" at the University of California/Berkeley and herself a Jew by choice. She says, "There is a struggle within the Jewish community, not just with Asians, to realize the real diversity of the Jewish world."

Adds Buchdahl, "There should be images of non-white

children in our [Jewish] books, in the movie and video images. There's an Ashkenazic assumption that it's the Jewish cultural norm. The Jewish community of North America is not honest about representing the historical diversity of our community. It's a challenge for us. We come from mixed multitudes, who were dispersed in many communities, [yet] the Jewish European community is the only one that's taught. We've all been strengthened and enlivened and made more rich by all that learning."

In their book, Gary and Diane Tobin and Scott Rubin show that American Jews are in fact a multi-racial, diverse community. According to their research, 20 percent of the six million Jews in the United States are non-Caucasian: Asian-American (the adopted Chinese girls are not a statistically significant part of this population), African-American, Latino, Sephardic, Middle Eastern, and mixed-race Jews. Conversion, adoption and intermarriage have all contributed to this redefinition of who "looks" Jewish. Gary Tobin points out in a telephone interview that "the make-up of the Jewish people has always been remarkably diverse. Biblical scholars will tell

Two phenomena converged: older Jewish women wanting to adopt, and China's "one-child" policy, which left baby girls abandoned in orphanages.



us that we were a collection of tribes. Pay attention to the Torah. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took spouses from someplace else. Moses and David married black women."

When Lee Miller, a New York-based playwright, decided in 2000 to adopt as a single woman, she recalls "I was originally thinking of going to Russia, which was my family background." Perturbed by the health problems of some adopted Russian babies she had read about who had fetal alcohol syndrome or other problems—and plagued by the idea that someday her child might look at her and think "My ancestors killed her ancestors"—she looked elsewhere. Miller says that she found, in contrast, that the Chinese children came from "regular families" and were available for adoption either because their parents were too poor to raise them or because of China's only-one-child policy. Seeing a documentary about orphaned Chinese baby girls, Miller felt that "all these little girls needed help." And so she undertook the journey to find her daughter, Emma Yael, now six.


Miller, who had her daughter converted at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, where her dip in the mikvah was witnessed by Miller's mother and sister, says, "My Orthodox aunt could not have been happier—one more to enter the fold."

What may seem relatively simple when bringing a baby or toddler to a Families with Children from China playgroup takes on other meaning when pre-adolescent girls start to explore their dual identities. Nor is this an entirely uncharted situa-

tion—the experience of an earlier generation of adopted Korean orphans suggests some ways this scenario may play out.

As Dr. Lin has observed in her study participants from across the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, Asian children who have been doted upon by a community when they are young may have quite different experiences as they grow up. “I’ve talked to women—Korean adoptees—who went up to bat mitzvah age in their synagogue, and were shunned once they were in their 20s and 30s. When they leave the community, or are not with their parents, they’re seen as Asian. They’re not being accepted as Jews in Hillel. They’ll walk in with a Caucasian non-Jew, and the non-Jew is thought to be the Jew. The Jewish community is not universally welcoming.”

Recently, some young Chinese girls in the Boston-area Jewish community have been invited to partner with Asian college students at Wellesley College, in a kind of big-sister program. “The adoptees feel this is great,” says Lin.



*Everybody loves a baby...
but what happens when
adolescents who “don’t look
Jewish” start to date?*

Lin underscores the importance of recognizing the centuries-long historical connections between Jews and China to help these families make the connections easier for their daughters. “There were Jews in China a real long time ago,” she explains.

Providing a strong Jewish identity, balanced with an equally respectful nod towards their Chinese heritage, is a major priority for the mothers of these Asian-Jewish daughters.

Judi Sherman of Phoenix, a senior vice-president at Smith Barney, has been clear that her Chinese daughter is going to have a bat mitzvah. Her nine-and-a-half-year-old, Annie Gabrielle LiNa (the last part of her given name is Chinese) “is very much into learning about Judaism,” says Sherman. “She’s never questioned her identity. Out West, the religion seems to be very welcoming. Our rabbi has a sibling who adopted a Chinese daughter.”

Integrating the two traditions has so far not given rise to anything that might shake up the Jewish world. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler, a rabbi-educator at North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois, says that when her 14-year-old Chinese-Jewish daughter was younger they would decorate their succah with Chinese images, like a dragon. “I did everything—Chinese, Hebrew, English,” says Spicehandler. “I tried to merge the Chinese theme. My daughter was very comfortable with her Jewish identity.” While issues around bat mitzvah are imminent, concerns about dating are farther away—and most of the women interviewed said that they weren’t worrying about that for now.

With a bat mitzvah on the horizon, Hipsh says, “At 13, they choose. She could choose not to be Jewish, but it’s not an issue. She’s a Jewish child in a Jewish family. I don’t know

Chinese-Jewish Children in Interfaith Families

The usual tug of war that occurs in intermarried families about how to raise the children can take on an additional dimension when race is involved, whether the child in question is an adopted Chinese girl, or when one partner is Jewish and the other an Asian non-Jew.

Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, a Chinese-American woman married to a Jewish man, jokes that her children, 15 and 18 years old, are “idol-worshiping heathen” and “non-discriminatory party animals.” Although Krakauer was raised in the Episcopalian church, which had sponsored her Buddhist parents’ emigration from China in the late 1930s, religion hasn’t exerted much of a pull in her household.

“Identity has never been explored through the lens of religion,” she says. “We preserved the spirit of the holidays, like my mother making Harvest Moon cakes with phyllo dough and Skippy peanut butter. Now my daughter, who’s in college, is exploring an identity beyond ‘my mother’s Chinese and my father’s Jewish.’”

Stacey Shub, an Atlanta Jew, and her husband, who is Catholic, have adopted a daughter, Sky, from China. “I was moved a few years ago hearing about the girls being left. Feminism was a piece of it.” So far, Sky is at the Jewish nursery school, but Shub concedes that her husband “wants her to be part of him, and part of me.” She expects that this difference of opinion over Sky’s religious upbringing is not an issue that will be resolved quickly.

For Heidi Gralla, a freelance journalist in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, her marriage to a Chinese-American man has not complicated their children’s upbringing as Reform Jews.

“On my end it’s religious, and for my husband, it’s more cultural,” Gralla explains. Ironically, Gralla is the one who researched Chinese New Year to make the presentations at the children’s schools. Their three children, an eight-year-old daughter and two sons, five and one, “have a clear sense of being Jewish and Chinese,” she says. (“Okay, maybe not the baby.”) “They had their baby namings at Woodlands Community Temple in White Plains and they will be bar and bat mitzvah at Woodlands. My parents still belong to Woodlands.” It’s her family temple, and her community, and a place where her children know they belong.

“So far, we have not blended the two,” says Gralla.

—M.R.

For the Chinese daughters of lesbian moms, the questions may be different.

"My partner and I were together for 12 years before we did this," explains Leslie Kornblum, who lives with Roberta Friedman and their two adopted Chinese daughters in Saratoga, California. Jamie, 7, and Samantha, 5, attend the Cupertino Language Immersion program at the local public school, where their curriculum is taught in both English and Chinese, becoming bi-lingual and bi-literate in the process, says Kornblum. Besides learning Mandarin, they also study traditional Chinese arts, like calligraphy, drama, and dance.

The girls also attend Temple Emanu-El in San Jose.

"On our 18th anniversary, Roberta and I had a celebration at the temple," says Kornblum. "We're one of the few couples who've adopted from China. What keeps being brought up is 'why don't I have a dad?' not about being Chinese in a Caucasian family." Since there are so few Jewish families in their public school, the family seeks Jewish company through their havurah. "Jews are very open to difference," says Kornblum. "The girls went to a Jewish pre-school. They've not had any problems. They've been part of this temple just like any other family. With a bat mitzvah, my only concern is whether it will be too much for them, with English, Hebrew and Chinese." —M.R.

what awaits her. I don't know about her identity search; as yet, there's not the need to deny any part of it. I'm not worried about the dating part. My grandchildren will be Jewish. I made a decision that the more identity I give her, the easier it will be for her." To encourage an identity with her Chinese side, the family is part of a group of other single mothers, some of them Jewish, with Chinese daughters, who frequently get together for Chinese food and other celebrations, Jewish and otherwise.

As 11-year-old WuQing sees it, "When you're adopted, you get to choose whether you're Jewish or not. At my bat-mitzvah, I'm going to say I'm choosing to be Jewish." What she enjoys about her dual heritage is that "You get to celebrate more holidays—like Chinese New Year's, normal New Year's and Jewish New Year's."

Most of these girls are still too young to have had a bat mitzvah. Others are still in the planning stages, with not much thought given to details, except perhaps for including Chinese food in the party menu.

One teenager, who did not want her names used for this article, is at a point where she wants simply to be "another white Jewish girl" and not have to deal with the dual identity she confronts in the larger world. Almost all adoptees wrestle with issues of dual identities, but for children adopted out of

orphanages there can also be a residual "survivor's guilt" about those left behind.

For her traditional bat mitzvah, this girl's *dvar Torah* was about the "Mishpatim" portion, which includes the passage about "not wronging a stranger" or the widows and orphans in the community. She directly addressed the larger social issue of why there are so many adoptees from China, and urged her listeners to take positive action to help these children. She said "These children are like the widows and orphans of the Torah. They are very vulnerable and they need our help. Ignoring them is just as bad as oppressing or wronging them. Some of the children are lucky, and find wonderful homes in other countries with families that adopt them and love them. But we have to help the ones who never have the chance. That is why I will be donating part of my bat mitzvah presents to help children in the orphanages, especially in the Wuhan Foundling Hospital, which is the orphanage that found me my family....Everyone can actively do something to help others, like donate money or clothing or food or time to help people who are less fortunate. If everybody did that, soon there would no longer be any strangers, the whole world would all be one *mishpacha*."

Despite this heartfelt melding of Chinese and Jewish experience, reactions to giving these Chinese girls a Jewish identity are still not always predictable.

"I got a lot of grief for sending her to a Jewish day school from the general Chinese adoption community," says Joan

Wrestling with her dual identities, a bat mitzvah girl worries about her sister-orphan back in China who didn't get adopted.



Story, a clinical social worker in Manhattan with a seven-year-old daughter, Alexa. "They felt she wouldn't be around a lot of other Asians. She would have been in a New York private school anyway, with only a few Asian children in each class. There are some adopted Asian children in her school, just not in her class."

When Story attempted to introduce Alexa to a Chinese dance class, Alexa refused to go back. As Story concedes, "She's very identified with the Jewish community. She told me that 'we can't leave this building. It's special, because this building celebrates Christmas and Hanukkah. Other buildings are just Christian.'"

Single mothers aren't the only ones to struggle with these issues.

Randi Rosenkrantz, 55, of Houston, Texas, and her husband, 52, made sure that both of their adopted Chinese daughters, 10-year-old Jill and six-year-old Kate, had Jewish baby naming ceremonies as well as immersion in the mikvah. "I wanted my

Continued on page 33

Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters

Continued from page 27

children to be well-grounded, and in a Caucasian family where they do not look like us, I needed and wanted to find a way. So I decided that through our religion they would hopefully feel more of a connection," she explains in an e-mail message. "They will both have a bat mitzvah."

Rosenkrantz is making an effort to ensure that her daugh-



The Chinese adoption community frowns on Jewish day schools. "They felt she wouldn't be around a lot of other Asians."

ters are linked to their Chinese heritage as well. "We stay connected to other families who have adopted from China," she says. "We have Asian influences in our home, especially artwork. I have a book collection myself that the kids will share as they get older, that have to do with China and/or Chinese adoption. I bought books for the kids on China that were age appropriate. We celebrate Chinese New Year."

With her husband, Lisa Gibbs is raising two daughters, 10 and five, both adopted from China. Uncomfortable with the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they initially belonged to in Brooklyn, Gibbs—who attended yeshiva until eighth grade—switched her daughters to a Jewish cultural program. Gibbs reports in an e-mail, "While I am somewhat sad that [her daughter Basya] will have a less traditional Jewish upbringing, I like the program there far more in terms of Jewish

ethics, and I notice that they are doing far more in the area of Jewish identity....She has even decided that she likes learning Yiddish—and this is after refusing to learn Chinese, and hating Hebrew at Hebrew school and Spanish in public school! Somehow this school has made learning Yiddish a positive to her!"

Gibbs adds, "I want them to feel REALLY Jewish and REALLY Chinese, not some watered-down version." Her five-year-old, Mira, takes Chinese dance class and watches Chinese language and song tapes.

For other parents whose adopted Chinese daughters are still quite young, there is an almost touching faith that by the time their girls are older there will be no doubt about their place in the Jewish community.

Debbie Halperin, living in Suffern, New York, has a three-year-old daughter from China, and an 11-year-old daughter from her first marriage. "The little one goes to synagogue for nursery school," she says. "Laci loves being Jewish. She loves Hanukkah, she knows the prayers for Shabbat. She's a Jewish girl through and through. She's part of the Jewish family. She'll have a bat mitzvah and be married under a huppah." Halperin, 42, is a founding member of a Jewish/Asian adoption group that recently celebrated its third Hanukkah party.

Ultimately, of course, little matters other than the bonds that have formed between mother and daughter.

"She's been enriched by the Jewish element, and I've been enriched by the Chinese element," notes Hipsh. "It's all good." ●

Merri Rosenberg is a freelance writer and editor based in Ardsley, New York. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Jewish Week*, *Education Update* and other national publications. emr45@columbia.edu

That Organ-Donation Card...

Continued from page 48

Women donors are far outnumbered by men. According to OPTN, there have been 39,218 organ donations by women since 1988—less than half of the 97,679 total donations. In fact, in almost every year for which data exists, the number of men donating exceeds the number of women by over a thousand. Womanshealth.gov makes clear that "finding organ donors can be challenging for minority women," specifically because an organ match is much more likely to work if both donor and recipient are of similar ancestry. Furthermore, size does matter, so it's more likely that a woman in need of a donated organ will find a match from another woman. The simple facts that govern organ transplants mean that Jewish women will most likely match with Jewish women. So: Want to save a Jewish woman's life? Sign the forms—in some

states they come with your driver's license—to become an organ donor.

It's clear to me now that all Jews should feel obligated (in fact, *are* obligated) to donate organs at death. Feminist Jews have been revolutionary in advocating women's control over our own bodies. Now, in ways most of us have probably never considered before, we have a chance to use our bodies for the good of someone else after we have no more use for them. ●

Melanie Weiss is a graduating senior at Sarah Lawrence College. She can be reached at melanieaweiss@gmail.com.

For more information, go to: organdonor.gov, optn.org and womenshealth.gov.